DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 520 CS 217 616

AUTHOR	Khawaja, Mabel
TITLE	Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno": A Cognitive Approach in Search of Illusions and Allusions.
PUB DATE	2001-11-00
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (91st, Baltimore, MD, November 15-20, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; *Literary Criticism; *Reader Response; Thematic Approach; *United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS	*Cross Cultural Teaching; Melville (Herman); Response to Literature; Tunisia

ABSTRACT

For one Fulbright lecturer teaching Herman Melville's novel "Benito Cereno" at the University of Tunis (North Africa), the setting appeared to be ideal for a United States novel course. "Benito Cereno", for the most part, takes place on a large ship carrying slaves. Eventually, the slaves revolt against their Spanish masters and demand to be taken back to Africa from whence they came. Hence, a great deal of the book concerns the African culture. Although Tunisia takes pride in its diversity of heritage, the lecturer realized she knew little about the challenge of interpreting the truth embodied in Melville's masterpiece. The diversity of student perspectives engaged the class in a complex analysis of three characters who were competing for heroic stature, and in determining heroic traits through behavioral attitudes and actions of the novella's major characters, the search was for knowledge that is prized for "its greater exactness." The cross-cultural teaching adventure soon turned into a quest for illusions and allusions. Since Melville originally wrote the novella as a serial, the lecturer, meeting her students every week, tried to retain the original breakdown of chapters with titles that provided a thematic focus for each session. She found, however, that teaching Melville's novella on the shores of Africa was an enlightening voyage across sea waters--in Tunisia, cultural differences were transformed into an interdisciplinary inquiry as they explored religious and historical allusions in a quest for the true meaning beyond the signifying layers of ironic reversals. The class realized that when the mystery of the detective story was resolved in a judicial court and the truth revealed through ironic contrast between appearance and reality, there was no fairy tale triumph of good over evil. Most were fascinated by the theme of human rights because Melville's plot does not lump together the ideals of truth, justice, and heroic glory in a didactic tale--he allows his readers to contemplate how democracy upholds the fundamental principle of human rights held sacred across cultural boundaries. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

ED 455 520

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno:" A Cognitive Approach In Search of Illusions and Allusions.

by Mabel Khawaja

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Khawaja
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

CS 217 616

Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno:" A Cognitive Approach

In Search of Illusions and Allusions

Mabel Khawaja, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English (Hampton University)

1999-2000 Fulbright Lecturer/Senior Scholar to the University of Tunis (Tunisia, North Africa)

Teaching Herman Melville's novella, "Benito Cereno," on the shores of the Mediterranean, in proximity to the historic city of Carthage, at the University of Tunis in North Africa, appeared to be an ideal setting for my US novel course. The cross-cultural interaction aboard Melville's ships also integrated the element of pluralism in our class discussions since the population of Tunisia takes pride in its diversity of heritage-- African, Arab, and European. I thought we were off to a good start, but little did I know about the challenge of interpreting the truth embodied in this masterpiece of Melville. The diversity of perspectives engaged us in a complex analysis of three characters who were competing for heroic stature. The divergent voices of the students' reader-response were somewhat alarming because the previous year's examination had asked the students to identify the hero of this novella? However, dissonance offered fertile ground for experimenting with Aristotelian dialogics of reader-response that balances the relationship between the author and the reader by placing the text in the center as the ultimate authority.

In the process of discovering the true hero in "Benito Cereno", if any, we looked for clues to unmask the illusions embodied in the text to raise it from a literal to a figurative level of reading. We also searched for allusions that allowed us to establish new connections with the existing body of our knowledge. In determining the heroic traits through behavioral attitudes and actions of the major characters in this novella, we were searching for knowledge that is prized for "its greater exactness" (Kaplan 56); In Aristotelian terms, it is a higher form of knowledge that combines "intuitive reason with scientific knowledge "(Kaplan 230). This cognitive approach to literature relies on an analysis of literary techniques in conjunction with individual response and empirical data to validate the truth through evidence in the text. Thus, my cross-cultural teaching adventure soon turned into a quest for illusions and allusions.

To sort out the heroic deeds in the moral drama of this novella, we were not just defending our relationship with a heroic character, we were also deepening our understanding about questions of responsibility, justice, and truth. Together, we were making new knowledge and bridging the gaps in reasoning by renouncing superficial layers of interpretation through dialogics that respected the cultural and empirical limitations in the classroom. The text provided the common basis for the "formation of our syntheses" through the individual image-building process of meaningful connections (Iser 135), while the literary critics guided us in our divergent interpretations. Nevertheless, it was clear that relying strictly on the critics or personal preferences would not produce a satisfactory answer concerning the hero in this novella because our analysis posed several troubling questions. Was Amasa Delano's compassion toward the distressed persons aboard San Dominick a sufficient qualifier to dub him a hero? Does the Spanish Captain, Benito Cereno, rise to the saintly stature of a hero because in the end instead of returning to Chile he remains with the monks in Lima and dies in a monastery? And finally, should Babo (the black leader aboard the slave ship) be disqualified as a hero because critics portray him as "a metaphorical extension of evil"(Winters 118) or just "pure evil" (Feltenstein 127)?

Melville initially wrote this novella as a serial story which accounts for its sustained suspense in the initial chapters. Since I was meeting with my students once every week, I tried to retain the original breakdown of chapters with titles that provided a thematic focus for each session. The novella begins with images of a "gray" sky and the "gray" sea as the narrator recounts the adventures of Captain Amassa Delano who comes to the rescue of a Spanish ship and meets Benito Cereno, a sickly Spanish Captain. Aboard the damaged ship, Captain Delano does not realize that the blacks had successfully carried out a mutiny and set the stage for freedom course back to Africa. ince Melville resorts to covert irony by withholding the information about the mutiny, the reader is invited to read the novel as a detective story or "an extended narrative riddle" (Berthoff 157). According to Chase, if Delano is considered the hero,

then "he is tested, …by encounters with masked experience"(142), and he "remains ignorant of the old World's spiritual depths." (53). Can this "enduring innocence" be defined as persisting love of ignorance that robs him of a heroic role?

To engage the reader beyond the literal narrative, the limited omniscient narrator's voice frequently comments on Captains Delano's limitations as a character. Amasa Delano is described as a "a person of distrustful good nature"('Benito" 37) which furnishes the backdrop for suspicious occurrences aboard San Dominick, a technique that heightens the elements of suspense and mystery. Likewise, frequent allusions to the unchecked power of the Spanish rulers who enjoyed both religious and military control reinforce the unpredictable sense of danger in the background. For example, the crew reminds Delano of friars who were associated with the atrocities of the Spanish Inquisition. To enhance the mystery, Melville merges historical and religious allusions with a reference to "Ezekiel's valley of dry bones"("_Benito"_39).

Amidst this mysterious setting of foreboding and promise aboard the ship called San Dominick, the narrator refers to Delano as "the visitor." He is surrounded by whites and blacks who "in one language [i.e. Spanish] and as with one voice give him an account of their victimization as a result or natural disaster (40). Even though they speak the same language, the narrator emphasizes the presence of ethnic differences by referring to Delano as an "American" among Spaniards and Blacks (40, 42). Also, the narrative unfolds a bloody ethnic encounter of a Spanish lad with black kids (49-50), and the narrator hints at Delano's failure to recognize the divergent ethnic viewpoints represented on the ship:

> But the good conduct of Babo [the black valet], hardly more than the ill-behavior of others, seemed to withdraw the half-lunatic Don Benito[Spanish Captain]
> as from his cloudy languor. Not that such precisely was the impression made by the Spaniard on the mind of his visitor. (43)

The narrator also points out Delano's poor judgment by mentioning his "blunt-thinking" eyes," and by describing him as "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire and irony" (53).

After boarding San Dominick, Delano enjoys the role of an imperial visitor. The timeframe of the novella, 1799, generated a postcolonial discussion about the color coding of slave trade. Somebody pointed out that under the ancient civilizations the color bar did not exist, citing the example of the Biblical Joseph who was sold into slavery. In fin de siecle eighteenth century, Delano seems free of racial prejudice against the blacks, as "he spoke pleasantly to the blacks ("Benito 62) and "well pleased" to see "the pure tenderness and love" between a black mother and child ("Benito 63)." However, Delano's character analysis surfaced a psychological parallel between Delano's fondness for his dog (73) and Delano's comparison of Babo to a "Newfoundland dog" (67). In this complex relationship of affection and loyalty, Delano displays his desire for ultimate control that is characteristic of imperialism. During the temporal context of this story, students' knowledge of history sparked interest in topic of apartheid and the violation of human rights in the African continent. Students searched for diction that revealed Delano's racist attitudes and his demeaning generalizations e.g. "most Negroes are natural valets and hairdressers" whose "easy cheerfulness" springs from "the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind" (73).

Another source of lively discussion was Nicola Nixon's recent critical essay "Men and Coats; or, The Politics of the Dandiacal body in Melville's "Benito Cereno." A major point of contention in her essay is the American myth about equality as a classless society when she refers to "a near-naked slave, a hyperbolically overdressed aristocrat, and sober middle-class Yankee (Nixon 360)," but she also introduces the theme of homosexual relations in this essay. That topic sparked students' interest into a close reading of the text as they looked for clues to support Delano's homosexual tendencies. They noticed Delano's fascination with the Black man's body and noted that Delano interprets Babo's acts of service as being performed "with affectionate zeal

…which has gained for the Negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant" (43). Likewise, Delano observes Atufel's 'colossal form"—another Black slave--with "admiration" (52).

Even though Delano's character is borrowed from an actual Captain Delano, Melville exercises cautious control over his character development to integrate layers of irony that expose the fictional Delano's poor judgment as he fails to discern the animosity between the blacks and the Spanish aboard San Dominick. As for Delano's pleasant disposition towards the blacks, the moment he discovers that they had carried out a mutiny, he becomes vindictive and transforms into a militant aggressor. Despite strong pleas from Benito Cereno not to pursue the slave ship, Delano is determined to engage in a bloody battle. Even his own officers object to this mission, but he employs his chief mate who makes a false promises to share the booty with the Spanish sailors. In reality, once the Spanish ship is captured , Delano hands it over to the Spanish to decide the fate of the survivors in accordance with the Spanish judicial system.

Delano's poor judgment and naivete are also manifest in his shallow understanding of the full scope of Nature in its constructive and destructive phenomena. He does not attribute the experience of his brother's death in a previous voyage as a natural tragedy. Instead, he sees natural signs strictly as a revelation of God's providence and a benign force. Martin Terry's essay was helpful in validating Delano's narrow view of nature as "self-centered"(161) and "vulnerable to confutation" (162). However, it seemed appropriate to question Terry's interpretation of Emersonian optimism of "transcendent goodness and moral providence"(161). After all, Emerson was an abolitionist whose optimism, unlike Delano, underscored the need for reform or the possibility of constructive change. Moreover, Emerson's concept of moral teleology in Nature upholds mystery as an essential aspect of the transcendental, as opposed to the reductive principle. "We have theories of races and of function, but scarcely yet a remote approximation to an idea of creation" (Emerson 382). The transcendent concept of God as the Creator of all races and natural forces seems to elude Delano because of his self-centered

viewpoint. Probably, Delano's tragic flaw is his refusal to learn from his mistakes of the past and change his outlook for the future. In the conclusion, when Benito Cereno reminds him that he had saved Delano's life, he thanks him for an act committed "against his knowledge and will," again manifesting his self-centered arrogance(102). While Benito Cereno broods over the haunting shadow of Babo, Delano is content to forget the past with no effort to moralize. In this scene, Delano takes pride in being an agent of the Providence –who is favored by the wind, the sea, and the sky.

Melville decided to use the name of the Spanish Captain as the title of this book because he occupies a prominent role in the development of the plot. Benito Cereno's viewpoint comes to the forefront with his deposition of the mutinous slaves in the last chapters. His ironic revelations expose the poor judgment of Delano. Although he survives the ravages of a mutiny, the devious plotting and hostility aboard San Dominick, and convicts the culprits, he faints in the courtroom and dies three months after the court carries out its sentence against Babo. In the tradition of sea yarns, Benito Cereno appears as a forerunner of Conrad's Lord Jim when he makes the critical jump from his ship. This jump marks a turning point in the plot and creates the moral tension whether Benito Cereno is a well wisher of the Blacks or the protector of the imperial laws that legalized slave trade. On the one hand, he betrays the Black mutineers, and abandons his ship and crew to expose the Blacks' mutiny. On the other hand, he pleads with Delano's not to pursue the Blacks, but after Delano captures the mutinous slave ship, he testifies against the Blacks in Lima. Benito Cereno's character is framed in ambiguous terms and the complexity of his role intensifies the focus on issues of justice and responsibility.

Under the legal and executive power of the Spanish law, Benito Cereno must condemn the mutiny or else he would be considered an accomplice. Melville's craft is flawless as he employs third person viewpoint to narrate the graphic details of ethnic encounters aboard the slave ship before, during, and after the mutiny from the Spanish viewpoint. Benito Cereno reports the graphic details of the atrocities committed aboard San Dominick by the blacks.

Additonally, Benito Cereno provides the bloody encounter resulting from Delano's assault on San Dominick. He even mentions Babo's attempt to restore peace and order after the mutiny by asking him to sign a written agreement that would turn the course of the ship towards Senegal. Although Benito Cereno had signed the agreement but his sincerity is not beyond suspicion. Apparently, in the Spanish court this breach is neither questioned nor challenged which highlights the conflict between legal authority and the private authority of one's conscience.

The shifting roles of Benito Cereno and his ambivalent attitudes were sufficient grounds for students to pick up the theme of Benito Cereno's guilt and redemption through the strand of religion. The students' mounting interest in understanding the religious and historical allusions was a genuine quest for knowledge. They were able to identify the allusion to Abraham as the patriarch of different nations and cultures (85) because of their own knowledge of the Qur'an, but they insisted that I provide more information about other allusions that could unfold new meanings. This discussion also helped to unveil students' illusions about Benito's piety whose feeble faith lacks the courage to act upon his convictions. For example, in the deposition, the one of the four drowning Spanish sailors performs acts of contrition and requests Benito Cereno "to cause mass to be said for his soul" ("Benito" 95). There is no reference to Benito Cereno's acts of contrition as the narrator's voice concludes the story by reporting that Benito Cereno "did, indeed, follow his leader" (104). In this case, the leader seems to be Alexandro Aranda, Benito Cereno's Spanish partner and slave trader aboard San Dominick who was killed by the mutineers. After having his body skinned, Babo had placed on Aranda's skeleton the inscription "Follow your leader in body and spirit" juxtaposes Benito's sickly body with his personal belief in life beyond the grave. In the concluding section, the narrator's reference to "a vault whose door has been flung back" diffuses the focus on resurrection by reporting the sequential entombment of Aranda and Benito Cereno. William Bysshe Stein describes Benito Cereno as "a false follower of Christ" who fears physical suffering and death more than spiritual decay and thus represents a decadent form of religion (Moral Axis 221). Benito Cereno's "foreboding response" about his

tomb followed by the description of the vault helped to show the connection between the text and the following Biblical allusion to students:

> "Woe to you, teachers of the law… you are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones…on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Mat 23.27).

Since Carthage in Tunisia is a tourist attraction as a historic site of early Christians' persecution, the geographical setting aided in bridging the literal to the referential content of the text. Local examples of faithful martyrs of Carthage (Saints Perpetua, Felicity, and Cyprian --the Bishop of Carthage) illustrated how Benito Cereno is portrayed as a weak character physically and spiritually. Melville crafted the last section of this novella very skillfully despite Winter's criticism that the story "is appalling in its completeness" (119). This part is narrated non-chronologically to integrate Benito Cereno's sense of remorse as he mentions the haunting shadow of Babo in his conversation with Amasa Delano(Melville 103). This confession precedes his arrival in Lima and underscores the short period of regret and redemption when Benito Cereno "regains health and free-will" (91) very briefly—during his voyage -- but soon relapses into a state of dependency in Lima "where both physician and priest were his nurses" (91). Subsequently, Benito Cereno's refusal to return to Chile and his failure to look at Babo in the eye, or identify him for the tribunal juxtapose his sense of guilt with his weakening character. Critics compare Benito Cereno to the Spanish Emperor, Charles V, because they both retreated to a monastery in their last days. Charles V represents expansionist power whose empire expanded to the coast of Africa. Benito Cereno functions as an expansionist agent of slave trade across the continents of Africa and America.

Babo is the beheaded culprit of the mutiny. His silence in Lima's court suggests -- "the manipulated character of so-called objective legal documents" which makes the verdict based on these legal judgments "appear unjust" (Weiner 66). The deponent describes Babo as the

"ringleader" whose leadership is acknowledged by all mutineers as they rallied under his command for a safe voyage to Senegal. Although Babo was a dissembler and the executioner of torturous acts in carrying out the rebellion and enforcing his command aboard San Dominick , his resignation to be dragged on a gibbet demonstrates his courage in his final moments. Moreover, the narrator describes Babo's undaunted demeanor made visible even after his death as his head "that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the plaza, met, unabashed, the gazes of the whites, and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church" (104). Clearly the voice of the narrator underscores the *unabashed* character of Babo, suggesting any lack of regret, cowardice, or guilt on his part. The reference to St. Bartholomew who like all the other disciples of Christ faced persecution and a brutal death recaptures the allusion to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. On the surface, the bones imply decay of the human body, but those who know the Biblical context of the allusion will remember the miracle of resurrection in Ezekiel's valley (Ezek 37:1).

In the conclusion of Melville's novella, Babo may not be absolved of his evil deeds, yet unlike the other two major characters who diminish in their heroic stature, Babo portrays a more knowledgeable and courageous character. While Benito Cereno's debilitating weakness of faith deprives him of a redemptive role, Amasa Delano's state of ignorance and self-centered outlook deprive him of a sense of responsibility that would exonerate his heroic deeds. Babo's subtlety of brains and undaunted courage suggest a sense of understanding and responsibility that justifies his fatal course of action on moral grounds. It is appropriate, however, to add that we unanimously agreed with Sidney Kaplan (1677-78) that the novella is not an apology for slavery because it is a literary masterpiece, not propaganda for abolitionism. Of importance is Melville's prophetic vision and his interest in "futurity" – as mentioned by Hawthorne ("Melville and Hawthorne") – which connects the issue of race to the question of justice in this novella. The historical context allowed us to recall how the African-Americans did not have a voice until they were given the right to vote, and we discussed how in a democracy one's voice is a prerequisite

for justified legal action. The narrator describes Babo in a state of powerlessness because his "aspect seemed to say: since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (103).

Teaching Melville's novella on the shores of Africa was an enlightening voyage across seawaters. In Tunisia, our cultural differences were transformed into an interdisciplinary enquiry as we explored religious and historical allusions in a quest for the true meaning beyond the signifying layers of ironic reversals. We realized that when the mystery of the detective story was resolved in a judicial court and the truth revealed through ironic contrast between appearance and reality, there was no fairy tale triumph of good over evil. Many of us were fascinated by the theme of human rights because Melville's plot did not lump together the ideals of truth, justice, and heroic glory in a didactic tale. Albeit, Melville does not overtly address the importance of human rights, his detached viewpoint and ambivalent images of gray allow the readers to contemplate on how democracy upholds the fundamental principle of human rights which is held sacred across cultural boundaries.

Works Cited

Berthoff, Warner. The Example of Melville. Princeton, New York: Princeton University Press, 1962, pp.150-147.

Chase, Richard. "The Mood of Withdrawal." A Text for Guided Research. Ed. John P. Runden. Paterson State College, 1924.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Third edition shorter. Ed. Nina Baym et. al. New York, New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 1989.

Feltenstein, Rosalie. "Narrative and Symbol." Melville's Benito Cereno: A Text for Guided Research. Ed. John P. Runden. Paterson State College, 1924.

Guttmann, Allen. "The Enduring Innocence of Captain Amasa Delano." A Text for Guided Research. Ed. John P. Runden. Paterson State College, 1924.

Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response. Baltimore,

Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Kaplan, Justin D. The Pocket Aristotle. New York, New York: Washington Square Press, 1965.

Kaplan, Sidney. "'Benito Cereno'": An Apology for Slavery?" Melville's Benito Cereno: A Text for Guided Research. Ed. John P. Runden. Paterson State College: Heath and Company, 1882.

"Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne." The Life and Works of Herman Melville. <http://melville.org/hawathorne.htm>

Melville, Herman. Bartleby and Benito Cereno. New York, New York: Dover Publication, 1990.

Nixon, Nicola. "Men and Coats; or, The Politics of the Dandiacal Body in Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" PMLA, Vol 114, May 1999.

Stein, William Bysshe. "The Moral Axis of Benito Cereno." Accent, XV (Summer, 1955), 221-233.

Terry, Martin. " The Idea of Nature in Benito Cereno." Studies in Short Fiction. V30 n2, Spring 1993.

Winters, Yvor. "'Benito Cereno:' A Late Masterpiece." Melville's Benito Cereno: A Text for Guided Research. Ed. John P. Runden. Paterson State College: Heath and Company, 1882.

Weiner, Susan. "Use of Legal Documents in 'Benito Cereno.'" Bloom's Reviews: Billy Budd, Benito Cereno, and Bartleby the Scriverner.Ed. Harold Bloom. Broomall, Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999.